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BRIDEWEALTH AMONG THE NUER

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In some recent articles I have described the Nuer custom of paying cattle at marriage, their marriage ceremonies, and their rules of exogamy.[1] Having recorded the chief facts relevant to a study of Nuer marriage it is permissible to make some general comments on the part played in the union by payment of bridewealth.[2]

It is no longer necessary to show that the African payment of bridewealth is not a purchase. Until very recent years the Nuer had no currency and nothing corresponding to what we mean by 'price' and 'purchase'. The word *kok*, now used to denote the act of purchasing something from an Arab merchant with money had a religious and sacrificial meaning. It cannot be used to refer to transference of bridewealth. I have heard the word *luil* used in this connection, but only with circumspection or in anger, for it is disrespectful to use it about marriage. It denotes a simple exchange of goods, as when a man who is leaving his neighbourhood exchanges his byre for a bull calf or when a man exchanges an ox with certain markings for one with his favourite distribution of colours. The word is only used correctly in reference to conjugal relations when a female Dinka captive is, as I was told occasionally used to happen, exchanged for a few cows. It is then said of her that "she was not married (*kwen*) with cattle but exchanged (*luil*) for cattle"

The word *kwen* means the whole proceedure by which a man and his kin obtain a wife by payment of cattle and her family and kin hand her over to bear children to them, and in other ways serve them, in return for these cattle. The

[1] "Nuer Bridewealth", *Africa*, 1946; "Nuer Marriage Ceremonies", *Idem*, 1947; "Nuer Rules of Exogamy and Incest", *Social Structure* (to appear soon).

[2] Some of the points made were discussed in a very general way in my paper "Social Character of Bridewealth with, special Reference to the Azande", *Man*, 1934, (194).